

## Wojtyla's gospel meets the New York theater

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 25, 2007 All Things Catholic

Of all the places to seek the legacy of Pope John Paul II, West 46th Street in midtown Manhattan, just off Broadway and Times Square, is not the most obvious spot to begin. Yet here, on the same block where aspiring actors queue up for auditions in the Actor's Equity building, and in the shadow of splashy billboards touting productions of "Legally Blonde" and Monty Python's "Spamalot," passers-by are met with a grainy black-and-white picture of an intense young Polish cleric, on a poster proclaiming "The Karol Wojtyla Theatre Festival."

John Paul always was a pope of firsts, and even in death, he continues to break new ground. On May 16, John Paul II became the first pope to have his dramatic work staged in the heart of New York's Theatre District -- admittedly, off-off-Broadway, but geographically and culturally right in the middle of the Great White Way.

Between now and June 17, New York's Storm Theatre is presenting three works by Wojtyla: "The Jeweler's Shop," a three-act meditation on love and marriage; "Our God's Brother," the story of freedom-fighter-turned artist Adam Chmielowski, later known as Brother Albert, whose struggle between art and a religious vocation parallels Wojtyla's own biography; and "Jeremiah," an allegory about the Nazi occupation of Poland that mixes Old Testament and Polish history.

The deepest legacy of John Paul II, however, may be less expressed by a small theatre company staging his plays, than the fact that the Storm Theatre exists at all. As its 47-year-old co-founder and artistic director, a devout Catholic named Peter Dobbins, puts it: "The purpose of this theatre is to lead people to God."

Utterly unplanned by anyone in ecclesiastical officialdom, Dobbins' Storm Theatre is precisely the sort of spontaneous, grass-roots evangelization of culture that John Paul hoped to set loose -- confident in the Catholic message, audacious in its determination to "set out into the deep." Since 1997, the Storm Theatre has staged a series of well-reviewed productions. Some, such as "Murder in the Cathedral" and "The Power and the Glory," have explicitly religious themes, but more often they're secular works with a spiritual and moral undertone.

In a sense, the Storm Theatre is John Paul II's *ad extra* model of the lay vocation in action. Dobbins isn't interested in reading at Mass, or working in a chancery; his more daring aim is to redeem the entertainment industry from the inside out.

The Wojtyla festival, it should be said, is hardly the lone religious presence on Broadway. Nearby is the Jewish Actor's Temple (which bills itself as a "Cool Shul"), as well as a Church of Scientology. On the Catholic side,

St. Malachy's Parish on 49th Street, also known as the Actor's Chapel, serves New York's artistic community. The Storm Theatre itself rents space from the Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin, built in 1894 as a physical expression of the tenets of the Oxford Movement -- an impulse which famously helped launch John Henry Neman's journey into the Catholic church.

In various forms, however, these are all ministries *to* theatre people. What makes the Storm Theatre unique is that, in effect, it's a ministry *by* theatre people.

Dobbins grew up in Philadelphia, where he attended Roman Catholic High School and Temple University. He developed a vocation for the theatre and drifted away from the faith. (As he puts it, "I lapsed pretty spectacularly.") Dobbins ended up in the prestigious Fine Arts program at Southern Methodist University in the late 1970s, whose all-star alumni include Kathy Bates, Powers Boothe, and Beth Henley. He said he went through a conversion experience triggered by being tossed out of SMU when he hit a wall as a student.

Ironically, Dobbins said he was led back to Christianity through the ubiquity of Eastern spirituality in the entertainment world.

"There's a lot of Eastern stuff that gets taught to you as an actor, relaxation techniques and so on. I began reading about Buddhism, and it was great, but when I picked up Christian writers, I found that they take it to another level. I always felt that Eastern spirituality goes in a circle, whereas Christianity breaks through it -- like a Cross, infinity in both directions."

---

Editor's Note: John Allen has been posting updates about the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM) on his daily column. Read Allen's reports at [Daily News and Updates](#) [1] column on **NCRcafe.org**.

---

Concretely, Dobbins said the books of C.S. Lewis were his point of departure, but what sealed the deal was reading *Orthodoxy* by G.K. Chesterton -- whose work Dobbins described as "Lewis to the zillionth power."

"This theater would never have existed if I hadn't read that book," Dobbins said. "It was literally like having a brain explosion."

Gripped by Chesterton's capacity to express the faith, Dobbins decided he wanted to try to do for the contemporary theater what Chesterton had done for early 20th century English letters. His Storm Theatre, founded in 1997, takes its name from a line in Shakespeare's "Titus Andronicus": "Now is a time to storm; why art thou still?" (Dobbins believes Shakespeare was a "great Catholic playwright.")

All of which brings us back to The Karol Wojtyla Theatre Festival.

Dobbins said he first tripped across a copy of Wojtyla's plays 20 years ago in a Texas bookshop, and has had the idea of putting them on in the back of his mind ever since. At one level, he said, the motive for the festival is good business sense -- he figured putting on plays by the popular pope would guarantee an audience, and indeed, pre-sales have been the strongest in the theatre's history.

Yet, Dobbins insisted, Wojtyla's work stands on its own in terms of artistic merit. "The Jeweler's Shop," the first production in the festival, focuses on three couples: Andrew and Teresa, who have just become engaged; Anna and Stefan, married but estranged; and Monica and Christopher, the children of the two couples, trying to make things work despite some baggage from their parents.

"When you first read it, it seems very dense," Dobbins said. "But when we did a read-through with actors, I realized it plays entirely differently. It becomes extraordinarily light and beautiful. That's when I realized that this guy knew what he was doing. He had craft."

Dobbins is aware of the criticism -- both of Wojtyla's plays, and of John Paul's later works as pope -- that a celibate cleric has no business pronouncing on married love. In brief, he's not buying it.

"He knows a lot about the human heart," Dobbins said, who also plays the part of Adam, the Christ-figure. "It's a bit like Chesterton in his creation of Fr. Brown. Everybody thinks that a priest is sheltered. But if you're listening to the deepest, darkest sins of everybody you know, I don't know how sheltered that is."

Other members of the cast agreed.

"There's a lot of heart in it," said Kris Kling, 24, who plays Andrew. Kling was raised a Presbyterian, and today attends an Episcopalian church. "The ideas are very strong. The trick is to get those ideas across while remaining dramatically interesting."

Kling acknowledged that staying interesting is a challenge with "The Jeweler's Shop," most of which is taken up by monologues, in stark contrast to the mile-a-minute pace of most modern entertainment. Yet, Kling said, it works.

"I went to a college where there were drama ministries, and a lot of those things fall flat because it's not good theatre," Kling said. "Often, a play that works well asks questions rather than gives answers. Through showing the reality of different relationships, this one ultimately asks, 'What is love?' "

"There are some really wonderful nuggets that touch anybody, not just people who are religious," said Elizabeth Wirth, 25, who plays Teresa. "I suppose most people who come are here because the pope wrote it, or because they're Catholic. But even for those who aren't, there's a lot of deep material. It's about love, it's about human connection, which I think everyone is struggling with."

Wirth, a Catholic, first encountered "The Jeweler's Shop" at the 2005 World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany, where she attended a reading by an English-speaking group. She laughed that "divine intervention" led her to this part.

Both Kling and Wirth said "The Jeweler's Shop" has resonance in their personal lives, since both find themselves struggling with relationships. "It's been a way to face that, and to let it out a little bit," Kling said.

Whatever the merits of Wojtyla's work, celebrating the pope near Times Square, perhaps America's leading citadel to secularism, can still seem a bit incongruous. I asked Dobbins how he reconciles his Catholic missionary zeal with the essentially a-religious, socially liberal milieu of the theatre.

"Can it be a hostile environment sometimes? Sure," he said. "I'm all for a plurality of ideas. Everybody talks about that, but they don't seem to really want it. The entertainment industry actually seems terrified of it."

In the end, Dobbins said, the Storm Theatre is about injecting the faith into the cultural bloodstream.

"As a guy who rejoined the church in his 20s, I feel strongly that it's not enough to say Mass on Sundays, if those thoughts and ideas are not represented in the culture," he said.

"The reality is that we are going to act pretty much the way our culture teaches us to act. It's going to take lots and lots of people doing stuff like this, just so you're not being crushed by an opposite way of thinking, without any alternative."

"These ideas are eternal, they're the truth," he said. "They need to compete with the other ideas on all the other blocks around here. Not only do I think these ideas are just as good, I think they're better."

The Karol Wojtyla Theatre Festival runs through June 17. Information can be found on Web at [www.stormtheatre.com](http://www.stormtheatre.com) [2]

The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is [jallen@ncronline.org](mailto:jallen@ncronline.org)[3]

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 07/22/2017 - 04:04):** <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/wojtylas-gospel-meets-new-york-theater>

**Links:**

[1] <http://ncrcafe.org/blog/2682>

[2] <http://www.stormtheatre.com>

[3] <mailto:jallen@ncronline.org>